DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 066 CS 210 381

AUTHOR Manos, Kenna
TITLE The Threat of Mass Testing: How Do We Prepare?
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Aptitude; College Admission; *College Entrance Examinations; Higher Education; Mathematics Skills; Selective Admission; *Standardized Tests; *Student Evaluation; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Nova Scotia; *Standardized Assessment System

ABSTRACT

A proposal to institute "a common test in the academic competencies" of English and mathematics as an admission requirement for all Nova Scotian universities was announced by the Royal Commission on Post-Secondary Education in 1985. The commission viewed writing proficiency as an innate ability, independent of learning, environment, knowledge, or background; thus, the tests were to measure ability rather than knowledge. A presumption behind the commission's recommendations was that scores on standardized tests would provide accurate predictors of academic success. These exams were presented without mention of either the needs of the students or the potential impact on high school and university curricula. Rather, they would be simply barriers to admission, their sole purpose being to decrease the attrition rates at universities, hence decreasing the burden on the tax payer. In response, the Metro Halifax universities set up a subcommittee to study the implementation of common entrance exams in English and mathematics. They argued that a test that was not informed by teaching or consideration of students' needs merely treated symptoms without providing solutions. The subcommittee managed to prove that implementation of the exams was not feasible but noted that rejecting the tests without offering positive suggestions for addressing the problem of students' writing was not acceptable, either. (AEW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED280066

THE THREAT OF MASS TESTING: HOW DO WE PREPARE?

Kenna Manos
Nova Scotia College
of Art & Design
Hallifax, Nova Scotia

In February of 1983, the provincial government of Nova Scotia established a Royal Commission on Post-Secondary Education. The three people selected to serve on this Commission had few academic credentials or experience -- one, for instance, was an actress; another was the president of a local dairy. They did, however, share long-standing affiliations with the Conservative Party, an important qualification in a province in which entire highway maintenance crews in various counties are sometimes replaced -- after a change over in the provincial government -- by workers of more suitable political leanings.

During the three years before this Commission made its report, institutions across the province waited nervously: expecting programmes to be cut, universities to be merged or obliterated, and other equally radical proposals. This was, after all, the province in which the faculty at the Atlantic Institute of Education (a six-million dollar open-access graduate programme) awoke one morning to discover from the daily newspaper that their institution no longer existed.

The eventual appearance of the Report, in mid-December of 1985, was greeted with considerable relief. The Report was notable for its timidity, though there were the predictable recommendations for greater financial accountability, among which was a proposal to institute "a common test in the academic competencies" of English and Mathematics as an admission requirement to all Nova Scotian universities. These exams were presented in an educational vacuum, with no mention of either the needs of students or the potential impact on high-school and university curricula. Rather, the tests were presented as simple barriers to admission, whose sole purpose was to decrease the attrition rates at universities and hence to decrease the burden on the tax payer of post-secondary education.

CS210381

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Kenna Manos

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Not surprisingly, a general criticism of the Report from faculty across the province was that it stressed financial accountability to the exclusion of educational considerations. As the Bulletin (March 1986) of the Nova Scotia faculty associations put it:

> The Royal Commission reflects the government's view that the focus of educational policy should be on creating barriers to restrict the choice of students while ignoring the factors which are related to the actual quality of academic programmes and faculty. Rather than recommendations for building excellence in the education system, the Commission has adopted the government's agenda of using restraint rhetoric to justify restriction on access.

A huge presumption behind the Commission's recommendations was that scores on standardized tests in English and Mathematics would provide accurate predictors of academic success; other factors which obviously contribute to the drop-out rate--such as lack of adequate financial support, motivation, maturity, work habits, not to mention the quality of the programmes themselves--did not rate a passing comment in the discussion of the exams. But the Report's specific remarks about the proposed entrance exams revealed worse misconceptions. For instance, the Commission must have considered writing tests to be the equivalent of I.Q. tests in order to offer this rationale for their recommended "tests of ability": "As opposed to knowledge, ability"--what the tests would measure--is "dependent on the quality of the individual student" rather than on "the vagaries of teaching in different schools." By this model, writing proficiency was viewed as an innate ability, independent alike of learning, environment, knowledge, or background. The Report continued with a breezy suggestion that the university "applicant's ability to read, write and reason" could be measured in tests which would be "reasonably easy to administer."

When the Report was released, the Metro Halifax universities immediately set up a sub-committee, chaired by the Dean of Arts and Science at Dalhousie University, to study the implementation of common entrance exams in English and Mathematics. Susan Drain of

Mount Saint Vincent University and I were selected as the "writing people."

With the example of the overnight closure of the Atlantic Institute of Education, as well as my previous experience with City Planning--where atrociously unsuitable buildings actually do get built unless opposition is swiftly and successfully mounted--I mistakenly concluded that compelling arguments had to be made immediately. My apprehension was fueled, too, by my recollection of the situation in Florida several years ago, where mass testing was suddenly instituted by legislative prerogative. Because of my impression that haste was essential, I made three basic tactical errors in the early meetings of the committee: I did not think I had sufficient time to marshall thorough evidence and documentation, I over-estimated the knowledge of my fellow committee members, and I was not sensitive enough to the particular in-house political background at the Committee Chairperson's university. But I should have known better than to assume that haste was necessary. As long as a committee is seen to be working on something, as long as the implementation of that something will eventually require the willing participation of some ten to fifteen institutions from across the province, precipitous action is less likely than, as an acquaintance once put it, "paralysis by analysis."

When Susan Drain and I began voicing, at the first meeting of the committee, our reservations about a mass admissions test, our opposition was initially viewed--despite our insistent clarifications--in a polarized fashion: if you don't support this test, you must be against any testing programme and hence against accountability. One of the strategies which worked well for defusing this blunt polarization was provided by Rick Coe's suggestion to change the paradigm from "to test or not to test" to "for what, how, and when to test." By changing the paradigm, we could raise questions about the best ways to test, the connection between testing and the curriculum, the possibility of diagnostic or placement tests, and considerations of other ways in which universities might address

the "literacy" problem.

At the beginning, I also made the mistake of commenting too much about entrance exams in general rather than restricting my remarks to province-wide writing assessment--as you can see from this package of my preliminary questions about the test which I circulated after the first meeting to other committee members. Talking about testing in general produced either aimless abstract discussion or an equally aimless exchange of anecdotes. Had I begun by focussing firmly on writing assessment, about which I could cite and circulate the relevant documents and studies, my comments would have been more credible and fruitful.

Another useful strategy for producing thought about the potential destructiveness of policies undertaken in the name of cost-effectiveness was to raise the question of "Cui bono?" Given the government's instance on accountability, it's regrettably easy for eager administrators to come up with the panacea of mass testing and forget the importance of our ultimate accountability to our students. The necessity of stressing our accountability to students was dramatically brought home to me in a comment heard last year at 4 C's when Sylvia Holladay, from Florida, quoted this plaintive appeal from an undergraduate: "You've spent so much money testing us; I wish you'd spent it on teaching us."

A test which is not informed by teaching or considerations of our students' needs, which is divorced from the curriculum, which is undertaken for the sole purpose of creating a barrier to admission, merely treats symptoms without providing solutions. In asking "Cui bono?" we made the necessary step back to consider what we might be testing and why, rather than falling into the trap of premature discussion about the particular format of an exam.

But the early discussions of the exam format--a keen subject of interest for the other committee members--provided me with a revelation of another flaw in my initial operating assumptions. I assumed that my fellow committee members--university faculty all--had done some thinking about writing assessment and were more versed in the issues than they turned out to be. Their field was either Mathematics, or, in the case of the Assistant Dean who served as secretary of the committee, restricted to teaching literature in a traditional English department. One mathematician suggested that writing could be tested by a multiple choice test of grammar and parts of speech, while the literature teacher suggested that the exam consist of a sight poem. I had not expected to have to start so far back. What was clear from their suggestions was how much work Susan and I had to do in outlining the issues and the background. We needed to demonstrate that the issue was much more complicated than an "easily administered test in the academic competencies." It was no good to give the other committee members our general conclusions about writing assessment which had been built up from years of teaching, reading, and talking, to present them with positions that had coalesced from half-forgotten sources and studies. We needed, as well, to stop responding to, and hence perpetuating, the continual anecdotal discussions of individual student performance.

About this time I learned, too, about the long-standing debate at the Dean's own university, where numerous attempts to institute some sort of a testing or diagnostic system, accompanied by courses in composition and remedial workshops, had been stonewalled, despite innumerable committees and even a resolution from the general faculty council, as far back as 1978, that an English qualifying exam be instituted immediately. In the face of wholesale objections by senior members of the English Department, among others--complete with glib rationales like "Writing is not a skill like riding a bicycle"--the university

had not been able to institute solid writing or testing programmes. Moreover, this was the university in which the outgoing president, in 1985, had publicly congratulated himself on the fact that, during his tenure, student numbers had increased by some 15 to 20% while the number of faculty members had remained constant. In the current climate of near hysteria over accountability, the institution of a province-wide testing programme--funded by additional government money--was seen as an obvious solution to the problem of student writing. With increasingly vocal complaints about student illiteracy from the Dean's own faculty members and in the face of his own faculty's refusal to address the problem internally, it was hardly surprising that the Dean and Chair of the committee initially looked with great favour on a province-wide admissions testing programme.

Given this background, Susan Drain and I realized that we would have to demonstrate clearly to the other committee members that the issues were much more complicated than could be readily addressed with the measure of a single-shot province-wide admissions test.

So, we adopted the tactic of mailing out, every couple of weeks, a new batch of documents to our fellow committee members. Susan began by circulating her survey of writing proficiency testing in Canada. I followed up with copies of the 1978 N.C.T.E. Resolution on Testing. That was followed by the Evaluation Policy prepared by Peter Evans and voted on by the Canadian Council of Teachers of English in 1985. We passed out recent material on writing samples from the Educational Testing Service as well as Canadian commentary on "Student Evaluation Practices" from the C.C.T.E. Newsletter. Next, we circulated Lee Odell's lengthy article on "Defining and Assessing Competence in Writing." With all this material, we were attempting not only to counteract the simplistic notion of an "easily administered test," but also to undermine Peter Evans' contention, in the C.C.T.E. Evaluation Policy, that it is essential to consider how

"large scale evaluation . . . can be conducted with greatest benefit (and least harm) to those who should be the principal beneficiaries: the student/s/ directly" and that "design of the evaluation" must be "such that data can be usefully related to program and to decisions leading to improved program design and pedagogy."

In attempting to shift the discussion from the anecdotal reports of students' deficiencies, which had plagued our early meetings, we began raising questions about reliability and validity--useful words when you're addressing mathematicians. We stressed that considerations of reliability and validity depended on clarifying the rationale and function of the proposed entrance exams. We emphasized, too, that a testing programme should serve teaching, and that tests which don't lead to diagnosis and feed into into courses are repressive. We quoted from Simon Fraser University's response to Susan Drain's questionnaire that "an approach which punishes students for educational deficiencies over which they have had no control is not compatible with the philosophical values of a university." In underlining the complexity of the issues, it did us no harm to indulge in parenthetical conversations about, say, the relative merits of primary trait scoring and holistic systems.

As Rick Coe pointed out in a letter: "All of this, of course, complicates the issue (which sometimes leads the proponents of testing to decide that they don't really care enough to do the requisite work--in which case they may go home)." And they now seem to have done exactly that. Given the threat of a quarter of a million dollars being spent each year, in a time of severe financial cutbacks in all university programmes, on a quick-fix solution in the name of financial accountability, Susan Drain and I are delighted to have convinced our committee that the implementation of such mass admissions exams would be at best ill-conceived at this time. But although the Committee decided some three months ago to recommend against the proposal for province-

wide admissions testing, the Dean has not yet sent out the minutes from the final meeting of the Committee nor has he written the final report. Nor do we have any idea about which of the positive suggestions for addressing the problem of students' writing, which were made throughout the deliberations of the Committee, will be included in that final report. If the solely punitive approach of a barrier test is unacceptable, an approach which rejects that punishment while offering no positive suggestions is equally unacceptable. Continued vigilance, as well as continued sharing of our experience, is obviously essential. "In sum," as Peter Evans reminded us in English Quarterly almost two years ago, "the situation is very promising for the profession, despite all the 'back to basics; 'what happened to skills?' clamour." But the situation is promising, Evans underlines, "only if the profession keeps on fighting, and . . . takes a leadership role . . . when the opportunity (or threat, if you prefer) of large-scale assessment comes along." (1985, p. 23).